

Chris Humann, Tumwater, describes his experiences in Mississippi

An image that will stay with Tumwater's Chris Humann is seeing someone's high school prom pictures mixed with mud, clothes and other flood-soaked rubble in Pass Christian, Miss. When he and his WCC crew arrived in October 2005, all the town streets were closed due to Hurricane Katrina.

The curbs where residents once hauled their trash cans had been transformed into mountains of debris. Unfortunately, the debris included furniture, household appliances, carpeting, siding, toys, and clothes from people's homes.

"For 30 days, we only had a day-and-a-half off. We worked at least 12 hours a day – and sometimes up to 16 hours. The last job we did we fell 14 trees for an elderly woman," said Chris. "Our crew learned to live and work together – it was like a family."

Chris and his colleagues traveled by van from Olympia all the way to Gulf Coast. In one stretch, they drove 1,000 miles straight through from Wyoming to Missouri. They also caught the tail end of Hurricane Rita near St. Louis.

Once they arrived in the Gulf Coast, the devastation was hard to take at first. But after a while, "you more or less get numb to it." Chris said what helped him keep his spirits up was the close camaraderie with the rest of his crewmates.

"It's so important, man. Just one negative comment can be devastating. We knew we had to keep things light because the last thing you need is bad morale," he said.

He said the experience also taught him something about himself.

"I was always a follower and never thought of myself as a leader," said Chris. "But during my experience in the South, I discovered that I could take on more authoritative duties. Somehow, when we were working I always knew what we needed to do. It really surprised me."

When asked if he and his WCC crew encountered any surprising or funny situations during their hurricane relief work, Chris described how his crew started one day's work right before Halloween. As their WCC rig was pulling up to a mobile home outside Pass Christian to help remove trees, about 20 skinny dogs ran out from under the trailer, baying and yowling their greeting.

He and his crew helped the two women who lived there cut down and remove a number of trees on the property. Instead of hauling the logs and branches away, the residents wanted the wood to build a

bonfire for the coming Trick or Treat festivities.

“We were moving this heavy chunk of wood to the bonfire. It took two of us to lift it and we put it at the edge of pile. One of the women picked up the log and just chunked it to the top of pile saying to us, ‘you boys in Washington sure don’t know how to build a bonfire.’ Everyone was laughing – it was hilarious.”

Chris is a Ford-certified technician, earning his associate’s degree from Evergreen Community College in San Jose, Calif. But working at a dealership or auto shop was never that appealing. He said his work with the WCC is “the best job I’ve ever had. I’ve never had a job that I love doing. The WCC is a cool opportunity for people. The experience and all the hard work have been great.”

He said he’d like to serve another year with WCC and is interested in being a crew supervisor. Beyond that, Chris wants to further his education and perhaps even become an outdoor field guide for mountain climbers making treks to India and Africa.